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Chukwuma Azuonye

*University of Massachusetts Boston, [chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu](mailto:chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu)*

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## **Oral Literary Criticism and the Performance of the Igbo Epic**

**Chukwuma Azuonye**

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

This paper is a continuation of a series of studies in which I have been looking at various aspects of the possible relationships between the poetics of oral epic performance among the Ohafia Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria and traditional aesthetic principles as voiced by local connoisseurs, ordinary listeners, and the bards themselves, either in the course of performances or in interviews recorded outside the various performance contexts. As I have pointed out in the earlier studies (Azuonye 1983, 1990a-d, and 1992), oral literary criticism is by no means peripheral to the Ohafia Igbo oral epic tradition.<sup>2</sup> My field investigations of its

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at a conference on "The Epic in Africa, Middle East, and Asia: Current Trends in the Scholarship" organized by the Department of Folklore and Folklife, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, on February 28, 1992. Revised versions were subsequently presented to the faculty and students of the Department of Black Studies, University of Massachusetts at Boston, on April 8, 1992; and at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, under the joint auspices of the Council on African Studies, the Yale Center for International Area Studies, and Silliman College, on April 14, 1992. I am deeply grateful to Professors Margaret Mills (University of Pennsylvania), Jeremiah Cotton (University of Massachusetts at Boston), and Hugh Flick (Silliman College, Yale University), for creating the forums for these presentations. My gratitude also extends to Professor Dan Ben-Amos (University of Pennsylvania) for comments and encouragements that have led to a substantial reworking of the original text.

<sup>2</sup> See also Ben-Amos 1969, Andrzejewski and Innes 1975, d'Azevedo 1975, Dundes 1975, and Arewa and Dundes 1975 for valuable comments on traditional aesthetic principles and oral literary criticism. Monye 1988 uses one model of Igbo oral literary

dynamic interplay with performance confirms Parry's (1928) and similar observations by subsequent scholars that oral literary criticism not only mirrors and defines the ethnoaesthetic standards by which singers, performances, and particular tales are ranked and enjoyed within a society, but that, in addition, it provides valuable parameters for the critical analysis of the features of the oral texts both in relation to their ethnohistorical significance and for the comparative understanding of some cross-cultural features of the genre to which they belong.

In providing further illustrations of the dynamic interrelationship between performance and oral literary criticism, I will focus here on one specific principle invoked by a highly articulate bard and oral critic, Ogbaa Kaalu (OK) of Abia Ohafia, in a detailed critique of the performances of another bard, Kaalu Igirigiri (KI) of Abia Ohafia, which I tape-recorded in April 1976. If I go so far back in time to draw my data, it is simply because the kind of evidence that they represent has since then not turned up again in my field studies with the same kind of clarity that I find in the set of data presented in this paper.

### **Background: Ethnoaesthetic Bases of Oral Literary Criticism**

I devoted my first paper in this series (Azuonye forthcoming [a], originally presented in 1981) to a general survey and discussion of the main ethnoaesthetic principles reflected in the various oral critical testimonies that I recorded in the course of my field investigations. That paper described four main principles that I had identified on the basis of the frequency patterns of certain recurrent phrases both in my tape-recorded interviews with various oral critics and in the on-the-spot comments by listeners in the course of performances. More for convenience than as exact reflections of indigenous terminology, I have chosen to describe these four principles as *functionality*, *authenticity*, *variation*, and *clarity*.

Broadly speaking, the principle of *functionality* stresses the various ethnohistorical and sociopsychological functions that epics are expected to fulfill in a heroic society. Among these are inspiration, enlightenment,

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criticism in his classification of Igbo proverbs from Aniocha. Arewa and Dundes (1975:38) have also observed that what they describe as "native literary criticism . . . could be considered as an aspect of 'ethno-literature'."

historical documentation, awakening of patriotism, and, generally, the perpetuation of the heroic spirit. The closely related principle of *authenticity* insists that the inspiring and enlightening voice of the tradition must also be the voice of “truth” (*eziokwu*) and “reality” (*ife mee eme*). But, for the Igbo oral traditional critic, “truth” and “reality” are defined not in terms of the presentation of the hard facts of experience or in terms of anything approximating a photographic reproduction of reality. Far more important are, first and foremost, the consistency of the bard’s message with the widely held beliefs and customs of the community, and second, the authoritativeness of the bard, measured in terms of his popularity and acceptability as a person knowledgeable in tradition and capable of paying balanced homage to the key patrilinear and matrilinear formations in the double-descent Ohafia society and their apical heroes and ancestors. This, of course, means that even the wildest fantasy emanating from a bard who is regarded as authoritative will be evaluated as “true” and “real.” But rarely do the bards I have recorded abuse this sacred trust. As will be seen in this paper, they strive as much as possible to locate the fantastic actions of their heroes within a world with clearly recognizable ethnohistorical features.

The principles of *functionality* and *authenticity* are largely concerned with the content and contexts of the epics; but they seem to depend on the other two principles—the more stylistically and formalistically oriented principles of *variation* and *clarity*—for their fullest realization in various performance events. The principle of *variation* demands not only pleasing variety of tale-repertoire, structural patterns, and styles of vocalization, but variety in the range of heroes whose exploits are recounted and the need for balanced representation of the various subethnic formations in the community, in keeping with the well-known republican and egalitarian ethos of the larger Igbo culture. But by far the most frequently invoked of the four is the principle of *clarity*, by which performances are judged in terms of the sweetness and audibility of the bard’s voice, as well as in terms of the coherence of the structure, content, and phraseology of the narratives themselves.

Against this background, my second paper in this series (1990a, first presented 1981), set out to examine the extent to which the performances of one bard—Kaalū Igirigiri—are informed by these four principles, of which he revealed himself, in my interviews with him, to be an eloquent exponent. In the third paper (1983), attention was focused on one principle—the

principle of variation as evidenced in the changes in content and structure in variant texts of the same tale as performed by four different singers in different contexts of performance. In general, the same critical voices stressing the value of change and variation also insisted, often in the same breath, on “sameness” of representation, that is, on the stability of the content of the tales. I tried in that paper to tackle this paradox, defining “the heroic essence” that ethnoaesthetics seems to view as “sameness” in a wide variety of texts constructed differently in a wide variety of contexts.

In the present paper, I will move on to the principle of clarity and attempt to illustrate and discuss the various ways in which oral literary criticism based on this principle appears to have resulted in a radical shift in aesthetic orientation in the performances of our chosen bard, Kaalu Igirigiri (whom I shall sometimes refer to by his initials).

A few additional comments on the principle of clarity may be useful as further background for a better understanding of this shift in aesthetic orientation. In the oral literary criticism I recorded in the field, this principle was defined by local connoisseurs, ordinary listeners, and the bards themselves by means of phrases that touch upon practically all aspects of the poetics of composition-in-oral-performance. They speak of the clarity of voice: *ikapusa ife anu anu a nti* (saying things that are clearly audible to the ears); they speak of the clarity of structure: *ikowakwahu zhiya ya ishi . . . ruo usotu ya* (clearly explaining everything from the beginning to the end); they speak of the clarity of phraseology: *itiikari ilu adighi mma* (excessive use of ornate language is not good); and they speak of the clarity of content: *ikowakwahu . . . ife mee eme . . . nne o ya-edo anya* (explaining what . . . actually happened . . . in such a way that it will be clear to the eyes).

But, in analyzing the various attempts by my informants to expound on these ideas, it was discovered that there is a sharp division of opinion—especially among the bards themselves—on the ways and means of achieving the goals of clarity. Indeed, two major schools of ethnoaesthetics are noticeable from the recorded testimonies. At one end of the pole are what we may call the *purists*, while at the other end are what we may call the *novelists*.<sup>3</sup> An analysis of their testimonies reveals that, for

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<sup>3</sup> I use this latter term primarily with respect to the freedom exercised by the bards of this artistic persuasion in introducing novel elements into their texts. But there is also a sense in which the practice of these artists resembles the art of the novelist in the written

the purists, clarity can only be achieved by the meticulous avoidance of extraneous details, *ife oduo* (lit. “other things,” or extraneous matters), and maintenance of the storyline unencumbered by anything else including ornate language. According to the bard and critic Egwu Kaalu of Asaga:

The poetry of our land is unique. They (the bards) do not get themselves entangled with all sorts of *extraneous things* (*ife uduo*). They restrict their narrations to just those things which they know are the facts of history. They begin by eulogizing, then they proceed to talk about just *those things which they know to have actually happened* (*ife ohu wo ma wu ife mee eme*). You see.

For this school, therefore, the best heroic narrative tale is one with a balladic linearity, which herocentrically moves with telegraphic precision from one point to another without admitting of digressions or embellishments of any kind.

The novelists, on the other hand, insist that clarity can be achieved only by doing the opposite: putting in more and more details in such a way as to define clearly the background of events and the complexities of character and setting and to involve the listener fully in the dramatic and lyrical moments of the tale. In general, the tenets held by the novelistic school admit of digression, detailed ethnographic foregrounding, and other “retarding elements” (Auerbach 1946) of the kind that, in Eurocentric oral epic aesthetics, are regarded as among the key features of the epic.

In 1971 when I first recorded the performances of Kaalu Igirigiri, he seemed from his showings and comments to be a devoted purist. He scrupulously avoided all the so-called “extraneous elements.” The texts performed by him were prim, compressed, and telegraphic in style, generally reminiscent of the Eddic lays frequently mentioned in studies of the heroic poetry of Northern Europe (see, for example, de Vries 1963). When some of the tales of this early phase were played back to the rival bard, Ogba Kaalu, who turned out to be of the novelistic orientation, he subjected them to one of the most rigorous oral critical analyses I recorded in the course of my fieldwork. According to Ogba Kaalu:

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literary sense of the word. Like novelists, they pay greater attention to developing rounded characters operating in a relatively realistic environment and to revealing their psychological dispositions through dialogue.

There are many things which we spell out by name, which Kaalu Igirigiri does not put into his songs. Thus, he fails to *represent things as they really are*. He *cuts everything up into small unrelated bits*. But when we, on our part, sing, we *explain to you quite clearly how everything happened from the beginning to the end*. But Kaalu Igirigiri *cuts everything up into small bits*. There is a hero whose story he tells—Amoogu, the hero who first fired the gun with which the short-armed-dwarf of Aliike was killed. If you are told *how this really happened, from its beginning to the end, tears will roll down from your eyes*. But Kaalu Igirigiri *compresses everything far too much!*

When this criticism was played back to Kaalu Igirigiri in one of our recording sessions, he dismissed it as the rantings of a jealous rival. Rather than address the questions raised by his critics, he went on to reassert his credentials as a master in the art of oral epic singing:

I can tell you all about your ancestors, right from the very God that created you, down to the present time; and I can tell you all about the mode of life your kinsmen lead today. None of my rivals knows anything about these things. Even Ohafia as a whole, I can tell you all about our origins—about the place from which we migrated to this place. None of my rivals knows anything about these things. This compound of ours, I can tell you all about our founding father. About other people's compounds, I can tell you all about their founding fathers. When I go to Amaekpu, I can tell you all about their founding fathers. None of my rivals knows anything about these things. As you will know, Amaekpu is not my hometown, but I know everything that exists there. Asaga, I know everything that exists there, everything about their founding fathers, everything conceivable that happens there. That is what we call *ikw aka*—knowledge of the ancestors . . . . My rivals know nothing about such things.

But, unknown to me, the questions about clarity raised in the criticism of his compositions-in-performance were not lost on him. This showed quite clearly in 1976 and 1977 when I went back to the field to record his performances. I noticed that his style had changed radically and that the kind of clarifying details advocated by Ogbu Kaalu in his criticism had set in. He had become an incipient *novelist*, striving to achieve clarity, no longer through the purist avoidance of details but through thematic expansions, the introduction of dialogue, digressions, and ethnohistorical foregrounding.

## The Principle of Clarity and the Performances of Kaalu Igirigiri

To illustrate the relationships outlined above, I will now proceed to comparing and contrasting versions of five different tales recorded from Kaalu Igirigiri in the period 1971-72, with versions of the same epics recorded in the period 1976-77. For each epic, I will highlight themes, episodes, and other aspects of the performances that seem to have been affected by the hypothesized transformation of his performance strategies. I will reserve my comments on the ethnohistorical and broader comparative significance of this transformation until the concluding section of the paper. But, by and large, I will attempt to demonstrate as clearly as possible the relationship of these transformations to the key ideas contained in Ogba Kaalu's criticism of his earlier texts.

### Epic I: *Elibe Aja*

The story of the epic of *Elibe Aja* is essentially a complex of two universal tale-types. It is consequently in two parts. In the first part, a monstrous beast (identified in the course of the narrative as a leopardess) harries the country of Ohafia's neighbors, the Aro, devouring livestock and people.<sup>4</sup> Unable to stem the attacks of the leopardess, which is nursing her cub in a cavern in a thick forest in the Aro citadel, Aro war chiefs set out for the home of their warlike and hunting Ohafia neighbors to look for help. But one by one, the Ohafia patriclans rebuff all their promises of rich rewards, citing past cases of bad faith and perfidy on the part of the Aro. In the end, the Aro come to the patriclan of Asaga, where the hero of the tale, Elibe Aja, defies the consensus of his people and goes to help them. He kills the leopardess and her cub and delivers their bodies to the Aro, who skin them and turn the skins into the mascot of their king. In the second part of the tale, Elibe Aja responds to a plea to save another community (or the Aro, in some versions) from the menace of a porcupine

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<sup>4</sup> The Aro are well known to history and anthropology as the community of shrewd businessmen and diplomats who masterminded the slave-trade in the heartland of southeastern Nigeria throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, acting as the main agents of the European slave-dealers on the coast and operating through the widespread fear in the region of their great oracle—the so-called *Long Juju*—which the Aro themselves called *Chukwu* after the supreme God of Igbo religion.



destroying crops in their farms. But his gun explodes in the beast's cavern and the smoke from the explosion chokes him to death.

In the only version of the tale recorded in the 1971-72 period, KI, the purist, manages to compress this great story into just 77 telegraphic lines of balladic narrative. But in one of the versions recorded in the 1976-77 phase, the story had blossomed into a 300-line tale that is not only four times the length of the earlier piece but contains a wide range of additional details. A careful analysis of this and other 1976-77 versions of the piece will show that KI seems, at every point, to be responding to Ogba Kaalu's and similar criticism of his earlier aesthetic orientation. He has learned to flesh out his tale as a strategy for clarifying the story line and its constituent themes and making clear those details of character and setting related to his people's conception of the truth and reality that heroic tales are expected to embody.

In both the 1971-72 and 1976-77 versions of the tale, the theme of the Aro movement from one Ohafia patriclan to another in search of help is given so much attention that it occupies no less than half of each text. But in the 1972 version, no reason whatsoever is given for the unanimity of the Ohafia patriclans in rebuffing the Aro. We are simply told that, in each patriclan visited by the Aro, the people refused to go, "not even one of them." Here, we can hear the voice of Ogba Kaalu interrogating his rival's showing with good reasons. But in the 1976 and other versions of the same period, we can see KI responding with the aplomb of a master artist to every detail of this criticism. He not only includes the rationale for the rebuff, but in the development of this major theme creates a whole range of other clarifying details. To begin with, more communities are named and invoked by their patronymic and matronymic titles. Through these invocations, the bard not only achieves more balanced representation of the major social formations in the community, as required by the principles of authenticity and variety, but he also offers the hearer precise information about the customs, manners, totems, taboos, and other distinctive cultural characteristics of each community, as required by the principles of functionality and clarity. But from a purely aesthetic-dramatic point of view, the overall effect of the serial listing of Ohafia sub-clans is that of the amplification, at every stage, of the superior heroic status of Ohafia and the parallel deflation of the pride of their Aro neighbors and rivals. With the increase in varied details of the heroes and their milieux, and with the repetition of the same desperate pleas for help, suspense builds as the

momentum of the events gathers toward the discovery of the hero.

In addition to these, the precise type of war in which Aro perfidy against the Ohafia manifests itself is described, and we are given an idea of the kind of anxiety that Aro mischief appears to have created in Ohafia at the precise moment of the search for help. In this way, the plot gains in dramatic intensity that foreshadows a major conflict lacking in the 1972 version. That conflict arises from the impression created that the Aro mission to Ohafia is one foredoomed to failure as a consequence of the myopic acts of bad faith on the part of the Aro themselves. Thus, when they arrive in Asaga where they find a hero willing to defy the communal consensus, it becomes necessary to fully dramatize this clash between the community and the individual. In the 1976 version, therefore, KI introduces not only a dialogue in which Elibe Aja defines his decision but a completely new episode is necessitated by the refusal of the patriclan to accept this defense.

First, the complication and the drama. KI introduces the theme of the refusal of the members of Elibe Aja's patriclan to assist the Aro and their insistence that Elibe Aja cannot be allowed to go either. The dialogues and monologues occasioned by this new theme help to clarify aspects of the heroic ethos and its underlying worldview. In the first place, the stiff opposition of Elibe Aja's people deigns Elibe Aja to defend his stance and to go further to request the Aro to disguise him by putting imported articles of wearing apparel on him. This development enables KI to create a new episode: the disguising of the hero. And the manner of the disguise prompts him to delve into an aspect of the history of the slave trade, from which the Aro benefit. The Aro, being chief middlemen between the European slave-traders on the coasts and the hinterland slave-markets, had access to clothing materials of a kind never before seen in Ohafia. Dressed in such novelty, Elibe Aja is able to pass unnoticed with the Aro through the ambush of his relatives.

In the 1972 version, the hero's journey to Arochukwu is dismissed in a single couplet. But in the 1976 version, there are greater details. First, we are told of the time of arrival, his waking up and taking a bath, and having his breakfast before going to the scene of the encounter with the beast. The actual encounter between the hero and the beast is dismissed in a couple of lines in the 1972 version. But in the 1976 version, psychological and ethnological dimensions are introduced to create a more realistic and visually perceptible image of the encounter. First of all, Elibe Aja is no

longer simply an emotionless, bloodless, formulaic entity—*di-egbe-ji-egbe-egburigha-awo* (Wizard-of-guns-for-whom-the-gun-is-a-plaything)—but a human being imbued with the human emotions of fear and the courage to overcome that fear. Second, his ritual utterances before the leopardess reveal another aspect of his character and enable us to appreciate an aspect of the traditional animistic tradition of the people, whose proximity with wild life inculcated in them a strong respect for the shedding of blood, be it brutish or human.

## **Epic II: *Nne Mgbaafo***

*Nne Mgbaafo* is the epic of an unusually courageous and loving wife who, when her husband fails to return from a war in Ibibioland, dresses up in the habits of a male warrior and goes to the battleground to search for him. She boldly confronts the inveterate enemy and demands death for herself or the restoration of her missing husband. Impressed and even frightened by her extraordinary courage, the enemy, who has in fact taken her husband prisoner with the intention of selling him into slavery, quickly releases him to her, and she brings him back home in triumph.

In the 1972 versions of this great story of adventure, love, and passion, the motivations of the daring courage of Nne Mgbaafo are rather moot because of the extremely compressed form of the telling. There is no background to the hero's adventure. We are simply told that he went to the war of Nnong Ibibio and failed to return. The focus is on the heroine's courage, but the ambience in which this courage is demonstrated is completely lacking. These missing details are supplied in the 1976-77 versions.

First of all, themes and episodes are developed that help to highlight the intense conjugal love that is, in fact, the primary basis of the heroine's self-sacrificing heroism. Nne Mgbaafo is represented as being not only passionately in love with her husband, but also completely devoted to his family. Hers is an eternal love that she herself sees as enduring beyond earthly existence. In developing this theme, which is merely hinted at in the 1971-72 version, Kaalu Igirigiri works into his 1976-77 texts interesting motifs from the Igbo worldview that stress the continuous flow of human life from earthly to spiritual existence and from spiritual back again to earthly existence (see Azuonye 1990d). Strengthened by faith in this

cyclical worldview, Nne Mgbaafo is able to defy and even court the prospect of death, for this would enable her to move quickly into the spiritual sphere where she hoped she would have the opportunity of being re-married to her husband. This complex of metaphysical motifs rationalizing the heroine's courage is intensified by a fuller development of the theme of the heroine's journey to the battlefield in which attempts are made by those who know her to turn her back. However, true to the novelistic tradition, Kaalu Igirigiri remains restrained in the buildup of the sensationalism of the heroine's journey. In the 1971-72 versions, the absence of any details about moderating influences turns the adventure into the highly incredible fantasy of a lone woman marching into hostile territory dressed and armed like a man. But in the 1976-77 version, Kaalu Igirigiri introduces the motif of the heroine yielding to pressure and allowing herself to be accompanied by four men from the patriclan who took the lead in the battle in which her husband got lost. This innovation not only makes for greater realism, but seems to be in accord with the historical realities of an age in which headhunting was so rampant that the heroine, traveling alone, would in fact never have otherwise been able to get to her destination.

### **Epic III: *Inyan Olugu***

Closely related to *Nne Mgbaafo*, the epic of *Inyan Olugu* recounts the courage and resourcefulness of a woman whose husband is an idle coward and ne'er-do-well in an heroic age (see Azuonye 1990b), a time in which the freedom, respectability, and rights of the individual in the highly competitive society depend entirely on that individual's ability to show evidence of courage in battle or in single combat. In those days of ubiquitous warfare, the one indisputable proof of such bravery was the head of a stranger taken in war or ambush. Those able to provide such proof of their courage, and hence of their battle-readiness in the event of an unexpected attack on their community, were ritually honored with the title *ufiem* (hero); those who failed to do so were discriminated against as *ujo* (cowards). The life of the *ujo* in the Ohafia Igbo heroic society was a miserable one. Not only was he deprived of access to all titles and social privileges; he was also harassed on a daily basis in everything he did. From time to time, his yam-barns—if he had any—would be raided and all his yams would be taken away with impunity by his age-mates in a penalty

As in the other epics already examined, the 1971-72 versions of the epic of *Inyan Olugu* are prim, telegraphic texts of 41 and 28 lines, respectively. In them all the ethnohistorical details outlined above, which are essential for a full understanding of the motivations of the heroine's actions and are the basis of the heroic alias that she earns as a consequence, are passed over speedily in a rather confusing way because too much is presumed about the hearer's familiarity with these details. But this, it would appear, is precisely what Ogbaa Kaalu's criticism is concerned with. Ogbaa Kaalu and other oral critics of the novelistic school appear to be keenly aware of the great gap in information between the modern audience of the epics and the heroic age to which the epics refer. The times have changed, and the wider the time gap between the world of the modern listener and the original contexts of the narratives, the greater the need "to explain everything," in the words of Ogbaa Kaalu, "in such a way that it will be quite clear to you how everything happened from its beginning to its end." As Ogbaa Kaalu correctly observes in his comments, such clarity seems lacking in Kaalu Igirigiri's 1971-72 performances. Here, for example, is the full text of *Inyan Olugu B2* (1972):

Inyan Olugu was a person of Amaeke Abam and was of Eyen.  
 Killer-that-gave-the-honor-to her-husband, Inyan Olugu!  
 Young woman of Eyen, Inyan Olugu e!  
 Great daughter, young woman of Eyen, Inyan Olugu e!  
 Her husband won no head in battle and so his age-mates seized his 5  
     yams as penalty for his cowardice.  
 Amaeke Abam and Nkalu-people-that-spoke-neither-in-Igbo-nor-in  
     a-stuttering-tongue were then at loggerheads:  
 Anyone that met his neighbor's child killed him.

Then did Inyan Olugu lure her husband out: "Please, come and cut  
palmfruits for me in the Nkalu forest."  
Itenta Ogbulopia agreed to go and cut palmfruits for Inyan Olugu  
in the Nkalu forest.  
She found and slung on a gun. 10  
Inyan Olugu found and slung on her husband's gun.  
She charged and charged it full of gunpowder,  
She led the way and went and showed the palm trees to her husband.  
And she told her husband:  
"Look at the palmfruits you will have to cut for me." 15  
Her husband straddled up the palm tree.  
He was there straddling up the palm tree,  
He was there straddling up the palm tree,  
When Nnong-Ibibie people came out in hot pursuit.  
Inyan Olugu, who was on the ground, took her gun and fired at 20  
the Nnong-Ibibie people.  
She fired her gun at the Nnong-Ibibie people.  
She shot and killed Nnong-Ibibie people, five men in all!  
She chopped off the heads of all of them and gave them to her husband.  
Killer-that-gave-the-honor-to-her-husband, Inyan Olugu!  
Young woman of Eyen, that is how she won a head in combat and 25  
gave her husband the glory of battle.  
And so Inyan Olugu gave her husband the glory of battle,  
Woman of Eyen Ezhiaku, Inyan Olugu e!  
Great mother Inyan Olugu, Killer-that-gave-the-honor-to-her-husband!

So compressed and telegraphic is everything in the narrative that it of necessity fills the modern listener who does not know the background with questions: What exactly is meant by *iri ji ujo* ("his agemates seized his yams as penalty for his cowardice," line 5)? Who are the "Nkalu-people-that-spoke-neither-in-Igbo-nor-in-a-stuttering-tongue" (line 6)? And what is the relationship of these people with the main antagonists in the tale, namely the Nnong-Ibibie"? How do these background social situations explain the desperation of the heroine? What kind of person exactly is the heroine's husband, and how does Inyan Olugu manage to lure him to go and cut palmfruits for her in the disputed land? Indeed, practically every line of the text calls for explication and elaboration. It seems to me that these are the questions that Kaalu Igirigiri sets out to answer in the 1976-77 versions, versions that are, as a matter of fact, the basis of the synopsis of the epic as given above. These later versions, responding rather point by point to Ogbaa Kaalu's novelistic viewpoints, run to an average of 187 lines in

contrast to the 35-line average of the 1971-72 renditions.

First, in respect to ethnohistorical foregrounding, Kaalu Igirigiri has worked into the 1976-77 texts important details about the deprivations to which the *ujo* was subjected in the heroic age. After the heroine's failure to purchase indemnity for her husband from these deprivations, a detailed explanation of their character and social contexts is offered in version B3 (1976):

Inyan Olugu broke into tears, young woman of Eyen—	25
She was a young woman of Eyen—	
She broke into tears: "What is the reason why you did not win	
a head for my husband	
So as to free him from the shame of cowardice, that I may wear	
beautiful <i>okara</i> cloth,	
That I may have a wholesome bath?	
I am a beautiful woman!"	30
In those days, if your husband won no head in battle,	
you were not allowed to wear red <i>okara</i> cloth.	
You were not allowed to have a farm.	
You were not allowed to own property,	
To wear cosmetics.	
If you wore cosmetics, your fellow women would arrest you!	35
Men in your husband's age-grade would come and seize his yams	
as penalty for his cowardice,	
And your fellow women would strip you, his wife, of your <i>okara</i>	
cloth and leave you naked,	
Which is not good.	
But if you won a head in battle, it was feasting all the way!	
Your wife would be hosting feasts every night without exception.	40
You yourself would be hosting feasts every night without exception.	
And you would become a venerable lord of the land!	

With this background, the modern listener is better able to perceive the motivation of the heroine's desperation and her consequent act of courage.

In addition to this ethnohistorical foregrounding, two new episodes are included in the 1976-77 versions in order to sharpen the contrast between the characters of the heroine and her husband. The first is the above-mentioned episode in which Inyan Olugu reveals her pragmatic, even Machiavellian frame of mind as she attempts to bribe her husband's age-mates to secure him a head in battle. Oral historical sources outside the epics suggest that such "unethical" means of securing heads were not

unusual in the heroic age, but they were tempered by certain rules that were designed to make heads won in such a way acceptable at home. The person for whom a head was to be won should be physically present at the battlefield, albeit at the rear, and he was expected to claim the head won for him by others by striking the body of the victim with the tip of his machet, failing which he could lay no claim to the head. Kaalu Igirigiri works details of this rule into his text in a dramatic turn of events that tells us more about the cowardice (or, perhaps, even humane attributes) of Itenta Ogbulopia. The deal between his scheming wife and his age-mates is as good as sealed, but Itenta Ogbulopia is just not able to stand the sight of a dead body, and so Inyan Olugu loses her money. This failure on the part of Itenta Ogbulopia makes Inyan Olugu doubly desperate and necessitates the creation of the second episode, one in which Inyan Olugu clears her kitchen, packs away all food, cooking utensils, and bowls from there, and sentences her husband to a term of starvation that would not be called off until he proved his manhood. But in spite of this very drastic sanction (a woman's last resort in the traditional Igbo society), Itenta Ogbulopia still resists the pressure to undertake any manly action. His immediate response is to accuse his loving wife of plotting to rob him of his dear life and he declares his intention to cling to that life:

He asked her, "Is that what they have advised you to do?  
 That I should go up to cut palmfruits  
 So that when the Nkalu people come  
 They will kill me and you will go and marry another man?  
 You will have to marry another man while I am still alive!  
 You will have to marry another man while I am still alive!  
 I am not for slaughter!

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But, of course, Itenta Ogbulopia would have committed a greater outrage if he had in these circumstances attempted to cook any food for himself; this would have heightened even more the existing public perception of him as a "feminine man." So he goes about begging for food and is, of course, shunned by everybody including his relatives, who ask him to go and fulfill himself like other men. It is at this point that he cracks down and submits to the horror of accompanying Inyan Olugu to the disputed territory.



**Epic IV: *Egbele***

*Egbele* is another epic in which a great deal of attention is paid to the passions of female protagonists in the Ohafia Igbo heroic age. A woman named Ucha Aruodo loses her first three sons in an “earth-sweeping war” (*aha-nrualị*), that is, a total war that involves all the age-grades in the community in active combat. She therefore turns her last son, Egbele, into a transvestite: not only does she dress him up like a little girl, but she also makes him perform the kinds of domestic duties normally reserved for girls. For a time, things appear to be working out in accordance with her anti-heroical desires and Egbele appears fully protected from going to any war. But soon Egbele’s paternal uncle, Nna Ugoenyi, becomes worried about his nephew’s condition and foresees a very difficult time ahead for him should he be allowed to grow up the way he is being groomed, as an *ujo*. He therefore approaches Egbele in the absence of his parents and apprises him of the grave dangers ahead. Luckily, Egbele is quick to recognize and appreciate these dangers and readily agrees to go secretly with Nna Ugoenyi to a war in the faraway Northern Igbo territory of Okpatu. When Egbele’s parents discover what has happened, they arrange for his maternal uncle, the brother of Ucha Aruodo—who lives in a patriclan on the homeward route of the warriors—to waylay and kill Ugoenyi if he should come home without Egbele. The plans are fully laid out, but as fate would have it, Egbele returns home not only with the head of a slain warrior but also with a live captive. His maternal uncle’s strategy now changes. Rather than carry out the well conceived murder plan, he welcomes Ugoenyi and Egbele with a sumptuous feast and accompanies Egbele home with a victory dance in which Egbele’s parents join. The epic concludes by asserting that the song of joy with which Egbele is welcomed home by his mother is the origin of Ohafia war songs.

Here again, the details given in the above synopsis belong to the 1976-77 versions. These details are either missing or presented snappily in the sole version recorded in the 1971-72 period, which, on the whole, leaves many questions unanswered. First of all, no attempt is made in the 1971-72 version to explain what Ucha Aruodo does to prevent Egbele from going to war. In the 1976-77 versions this information is supplied by the inclusion of the transvestite episode. Second, the 1971-72 version lacks precise details about the manner and rationale of Egbele’s persuasion to go to war, details that are rather well developed in the 1976-77 versions. Third, there

is even a great deal of confusion in the naming of the heroes and heroines in the 1971-72 versions. Egbele's mother is named Nne Ugoenyi while Nna Ugoenyi is unnamed. These mucked-up details of naming and kinship relationships are cleared up in the 1976-77 versions. Finally, the 1976-77 versions contain a whole range of other details about preparations for war, the processing of heads won in battle, and the final victory dance, details that are completely lacking in the 1971-72 version.

In *Egbele*, therefore, as in the other epics earlier examined, we can see further evidence of what is all too clearly recognizable as a radical transformation of Kaalu Igirigiri's performance strategies along lines specified by oral literary criticism of the kind offered by Ogbaa Kaalu. The more detailed ethnohistorical foregrounding helps to illuminate character and setting, and dramatic conflict is sharpened through the intensification of dialogue and psychological motivations of actions.

### **Epic V: *Amoogu***

*Amoogu* is the epic of the unpromising hero who, in the face of grave danger to communal self-esteem, accomplishes a task vital for the victory of his people where the well established heroes fail. In the heyday of their heroic age, the Ohafia Igbo saw themselves as the most powerful people in the world. But much to their chagrin, there came a time when their warriors found themselves unable to conquer a small community called Aliike Ishiagu ('Liike Ishiagu in the texts) whom they refer to contemptuously as "makers of pots and what not." This situation calls for the offices of a diviner. From the great diviner, Okoro Mkpi, the Ohafia warriors learn that they cannot conquer Aliike Ishiagu until they are able to kill their general—a short-armed dwarf called Omiiko—who is so replete with charms of invulnerability that once he stands on the way he confers his invulnerability on all who come after him; and Omiiko cannot be killed except with one of twelve guns charged by a man sitting naked in a nest of soldier ants. This is the great heroic task that dominates the epic.

In the catalogue of heroes with which all the versions of the epic begin, all the apical heroes come forward one by one, each fully determined to fulfill this great task, but they all fail in their turns. In the end, a little-known warrior from the smallest patriclan in Ohafia comes forward and is allowed to try after much skepticism on the part of the leading warriors.

But surprisingly to everyone, Amoogu bears through and charges all the twelve guns. The Aliike dwarf is killed, the defenses of his people are broken, and the Ohafia warriors, giving vent to their long-accumulated anger, unleash total massacre on the people and set their homes on fire. But at the end of the campaign, jealousy aroused in the hearts of his comrades-in-arms over his spectacular success breeds conspiracy against Amoogu. Fearing that he would outshine them at home, even perchance attract their wives and all the young women to run after him, they agree among themselves to assassinate Amoogu and to bring home his chopped-off head alongside the one hundred and forty heads taken from Aliike. In due course, however, Amoogu's spirit takes his revenge against his assassins. While at watch, they overhear Amoogu's mother lamenting the death of her son and wailing over the carrying off of her chickens by hawks and kites nesting on a silk cotton tree overlooking her house. Pricked by their consciences, they agree to cut down the tree. But they drink palmwine as they do so, and when the tree is about to fall, they drunkenly agree to hold it up so that it does not crash on Amoogu's mother's house. But, informed by Amoogu's spirit, the silk cotton tree falls on the culprits and crushes them all to death.

All these themes are contained in all the versions of the epic recorded in 1971-72 and 1976-77. But, here again, we find that the 1976-77 versions are much more elaborate both in terms of the number of lines they contain and the number of background themes and episodes included in them. It must be remarked at this stage that, in his criticism of the performances of Kaalu Igirigiri, Ogbaa Kaalu dwells at some length on his renderings of the epic of *Amoogu*, and his views were played back to Kaalu Igirigiri himself. This is, however, not to suggest that the 1976-77 versions were directly provoked by this playback. It seems rather that Kaalu Igirigiri was already in the course of reframing his performance strategies before that playback, but in line with oral criticism of a kind which Ogbaa Kaalu's views seem to epitomize and to which, as I have already suggested, he seems to have been exposed all along. Indeed, the overall impression left by the 1976-77 versions is that of a complex of themes and episodes being unscrambled for complete recomposition in a form that would accommodate as many essential and clarifying ethnohistorical details as possible without destroying the central dramatic conflicts.

Signs of recomposition can be seen by comparing the opening lines of the 1971-72 versions with those of the 1976-77 versions. In the former,

we are introduced abruptly to the Ohafia warriors as they set out for war. But the 1976-77 versions introduce and describe a hero-council at Elu before the departure. Elu, the venue of this council of the warriors, is the traditional capital of Ohafia and the usual starting-point of all military operations during the heroic age. It is also the point at which warriors converged after all expeditions for the victory dance and the ritual cleansing of the warriors in the shrine of their great war-deity, Oke Ikwan and his consort Orie. In addition to this traditional setting, which is absent from the 1971-72 versions, the 1976-77 versions also bring in the figure of a paramount war chief who acts as a rallying force and in whose home the problem posed by Liike is first discussed before any action is taken. One can see quite clearly that these fine details in ethnohistorical information are addressed to the modern audience whom, following criticism of his earlier works, Kaalu Igirigiri has come to see as largely uninformed about the conditions under which decisions about wars were taken during the heroic age. In striving for greater clarity through the inclusion of more detailed information about the ambience of the epics, Kaalu Igirigiri succeeds in fulfilling two other ethnoaesthetic principles at the same breath, namely authenticity and functionality. He paints a picture of the past that his audience finds both illuminating and in accord with the known facts about their history and traditions.

Also in the 1976-77 recompositions of the epics, we can see Kaalu Igirigiri filling out a number of gaps in the story itself that detract from the sense of realism he strives to convey. Among many other questions, the audience might ask: what is the connection of the soldier-ants and the invulnerability of the short-armed dwarf of Aliike? By what means does Amoogu succeed in sitting in a nest of soldier-ants and charging twelve guns with gun-powder? And where does the incident itself take place?

Kaalu Igirigiri addresses these questions in his 1976-77 efforts at recomposition. First, through the mouth of the diviner, Okoro Mkpi, it is revealed that the invulnerability of the dwarf stems from some form of sympathetic magic operating on the basis of the law of similarity as described by Frazer (1922). Second, the recompositions lift all mystery out of the hero's power to endure the stings of hundreds of soldier-ants as he sits in the nest charging twelve guns one after the other. According to version B4, Amoogu's skin is covered by scabs similar to those found on water-yams and because of this feature, he is unable to feel any pain at all as the soldier-ants sting him. Ogbaa Kaalu gives an extended description of

Amoogu's thick skin in his commentary and suggests that the hero had a kind of skin-disease that itched persistently. Thus it turns out that, as a matter of fact, Amoogu would find it more pleasurable than uncomfortable to sit in the nest of soldier ants, because the bites would help to minimize the itching. Finally, the scene of the action, which does not appear to have any clear locus in the 1971-72 versions, is now precisely located at the outskirts of Aliike where there are large swarms of soldiers ants associated with the dwarf's magic.

Ogbaa Kaalu's final critique of Kaalu Igirigiri's rendering of the epic of Amoogu pertains to the emotive impact of his style of vocalization:

The pathetic cry of Amoogu's mother, he did not reproduce it properly. Yes, the pathetic cry of Amoogu's mother, he did not reproduce it properly. That's one thing. The question asked by Amoogu's mother, he did not reproduce it properly. There was a question which Amoogu's mother asked: "O where is my dear son? . . ." And she was told that her son was on the way. But, at night, her son's head was placed for her on a fence in her bathing enclosure and she was told to go there and take her bath so she would see what was placed there for her. When she got there, she found that it was the head of her son. Kaalu Igirigiri did not put this detail into his composition. . . . But when we, on our part, sing it, we put in even the lament of that woman when her son failed to return. There is a way in which one can simulate that lament and tears will roll down from your eyes.

It is difficult to illustrate these largely aural histrionic features of the performances without the benefit of listening to the actual tape-recordings. Nevertheless, in this one facet of Ogbaa Kaalu's criticism, his evaluations seem to differ from those of other oral critics, for whom Kaalu Igirigiri's mellow singing voice and its capacity to change in relations to the changing moods of his tales are very highly rated. Indeed, at the end of version B4, the audience seems so impressed by his representation of the hero's mother's passion that two voices can be clearly heard with the following verdicts.

Voice A: *Olu akpoki!* (A robust voice.)

Voice B: *O di ike o!* (It is very powerful indeed.)

But all the same, Kaalu Igirigiri seems impelled by the views of his critics to attempt to touch up the lyrical passages representing the lament of Amoogu's mother, but with dubious results; very little improvement in the

coherence of the narrative seems to have accrued from this effort. Rather, one gains the impression of a certain degree of padding with the inevitable feeling of monotony.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

It seems quite clear from the foregoing that the changes we have observed in the 1976-77 versions of the five epics, examined above, represent Kaalu Igirigiri's responses to criticism of the kind offered by Ogbaa Kaalu of his 1971-72 performances. If this is not so, we will be hard put to find a more logical explanation for what would otherwise be a very elaborate set of coincidences, especially in the light of the fact that oral literary criticism is in fact not only an active part of performances but a dynamic activity of everyday discourse in the Ohafia community in which views, knowledgeable and not so knowledgeable, expert and lay, purist and novelistic, are constantly expressed about singers, performances, and tales, especially at the behest of an interested outside investigator. The evidence considered in this paper seems clearly to suggest that, in line with the views of informed critics of the novelistic school, Kaalu Igirigiri has sought to achieve greater clarity in his compositions-in-performance through the addition of details of the kind that he scrupulously avoided in the earlier phase when he operated as a purist. In general, four main kinds of clarifying details have been added in the 1976-77 versions: more detailed ethnohistorical foregrounding involving the expansion of various themes and episodes presented in compressed form in the performances of the first phase; new themes and episodes vital in furthering the plot of the narratives and clarifying the diegesis of the actions of the heroes; deeper and more elaborate characterization highlighting the mental and psychological dispositions of the heroes; and dramatic conflicts developed by means of dialogue and the intensification of character contrasts.

It also seems quite clear, from the evidence we have examined, that the recognition of the wide gap in information between his modern audience and the realities of the heroic age to which the epic refers is primarily responsible for Kaalu Igirigiri's acceptance of the views of his critics and for the reworking of his performance strategies accordingly. Lord (1991b:109) suggests that "the length of the Homeric poems . . . may well be due to the role of writing in their creation at the moment, or during

the hours and days when Homer dictated them to a scribe.” This may well be so. But the evidence we have considered suggests an alternative view of the expansion or lengthening of oral narrative material originally told in compressed form. It seems clear, from the example of Kaalu Igirigiri, that the expansion of his texts from an earlier balladic form is due in large measure to his recognition, under the pressure of informed oral literary criticism, of the wide information gap between his modern audiences and the realities of the heroic world in which the actions of his heroes are located. The situation is implied in Parry’s early observations on the relations of performance and oral literary criticism (1928:1):

The literature of every country and every time is understood as it ought to be only by the author and his contemporaries. Between him and them there exists a common stock of experience which enables the author to mention an object or to express an idea with the certainty that his audience will imagine the same object or will grasp the subtleties of his idea. One aspect of the author’s genius is his taking into account at every point the ideas and information of those to whom he is addressing his work. The task, therefore, of one who lives in another age and wants to appreciate the work correctly, consists precisely in rediscovering the varied information and complexes of ideas which the author assumed to be the natural property of his audience.

The closer the audience is to the diegesis of the oral tale, the less the need to load the text with clarifying details of the kind favored by oral critics of the novelistic persuasion in the Ohafia Igbo oral epic tradition.

A second point that emerges from the evidence we have considered has to do with the wider significance of the very fact that Kaalu Igirigiri is able to rework his texts from the highly compressed forms of the 1971-72 versions to the more elaborate forms of the 1976-77 versions. This flexibility shows quite clearly that the epic material on hand is a highly malleable structure of the imagination in which length or brevity is more a function of the aesthetic orientation of the artist and the sociology of audience relations to the matter of the texts than an absolute generic feature of the oral epic. The implications of this observation for the comparative study of the epic need perhaps to be highlighted, since they may be useful in any revisitation of the old debate, emanating from Eurocentric preconceptions, over the existence or non-existence of the epic in Africa.

For example, in defining the features of the African epic, Johnson

(1980) includes “length” in his inventory of what he regards as the four primary characteristics of the epic. But, quite far from that, it would seem rather that there are only three primary characteristics of the epic, namely the *heroic* tone, *narrative* structure, and *poetic* language. “Length” and all other features would seem to be negotiable, a point that emerges from Bynum’s (1969) survey of “The Generic Nature of Oral Epic Poetry” and Lord’s numerous reflections on the question. As Lord (1991b:109) has pointed out, the idea of “an epic as a long narrative poem recounting in a high style the deeds of heroes of the past” was derived “from a consideration of the Homeric poems and of Vergil’s *Aeneid*” as the supreme archetypes of all epics. Thus Bynum (54) refers to post-Aristotelian definitions of the epic as “long verse narrative sharing the qualities of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.” Lord reminds us that Lönnrot’s production of an artificial epic—the *Kalevala*—by the stitching together of several independent heroic narrative poems into one long narrative poem was based on this conception of the epic. But the truly traditional epic, like the types collected by Parry and Lord among the South Slavs and the Igbo examples examined in this paper, does not appear to be definable in terms of length. Thus Lord (104) refers to the South Slavic materials as “independent songs, both short and long” that celebrate the doings of heroes.

In the performances we have considered, we have seen that, within the same community, the length of heroic narrative songs or poems depends on the aesthetic orientation of the artist. If Kaalu Igirigiri had chosen to ignore the views of the novelists, he would have continued to produce shorter narratives in which the same materials presented in more elaborate form in the later performances are presented in more compressed form. But the question might arise: can he afford to ignore such criticism? No doubt, there are possibilities of other interpretations of the data we have considered. But judging from the strength of opinion among the *purists* and the *novelists*, there is no reason why an artist of one persuasion cannot reject the views of critics of another persuasion and continue to perform in a style he finds more congenial to his artistic genius, if he is convinced that he can carry his audience along with him. Indeed, not all the epics of the 1976-77 phases underwent the processes of expansion in the performances of Kaalu Igirigiri. In these texts, which we have no space to consider in this paper, it can safely be assumed that he is confident that his audience would have no problem in grasping the background of the actions of the heroes presented in them.



This leads us to our final point. Despite recent trends in oral literary scholarship that emphasize the need to pay more and more attention to actual features of performance, there is still a tendency to comment on oral compositions without proper reference to their dynamic synchronic and diachronic variations and the vectors of their performance and ethnoaesthetic ambience. Had our recordings of the performances of Kaalu Igirigiri been called off after the 1971-72 version, and had we stopped short at this point without recording versions of the same tales by other bards and paying adequate attention to oral literary criticism, a totally different set of conclusions would have been arrived at concerning the character of his performance and the true nature of the wider epic tradition.

*University of Massachusetts, Boston*

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